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AUTHOR MacPhee, David; Geddes, Louise
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ABSTRACT

This study examined adults' beliefs about parenthood in terms of Veevers' (1973) notion of "cultural myths" about adulthood and tried to account for the origins and importance of the myths. Subjects were 93 undergraduates in a junior-level course on parenting who completed the Survey of Beliefs about Parenthood at the beginning and end of the course, and measures of child care experience on the first day of class. A snowball sampling approach produced data from 204 parents whose ages ranged from 19 to 84 years. The group included 53 fathers. Four clear dimensions of beliefs emerged from a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation: (1) generativity; (2) role strain; (3) parental self-restraint; and (4) a unidirectional parent effects model suggesting that parents are responsible for "how their children turn out." On approximately half of the items derived from LeMasters' (1974) and Veevers' (1973) work, parents' experiences disagreed with expert opinion. On most of these items, responses suggested large individual differences in adults' experiences as parents and acceptance of cultural messages about the role of parents. Parents and pretested students held similar beliefs about parenthood, with the exception that parents perceived significantly less role strain than did students. Generational differences in beliefs are discussed. (RH)

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Sources of Variation in Beliefs About Parenthood

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David MacPhee & Louise Geddes

Dept. of Human Development & Family Studies
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523

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In part, roles are beliefs or expectations that people ought to behave in certain ways. These beliefs may be critical to the choice to become a parent, and to functioning in that role. For example, people with a pessimistic view of parenting or children are less likely to choose to become parents (Hoffman & Manis, 1979). Role theory also has been invoked to explain the stress of parenthood: Role expectations are ambiguous, especially because of changes in women's roles (Entwisle & Doering, 1981), and the complexity of the role makes its assumption especially difficult (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979).

The paltry research on beliefs about the parental role has focused on the social meanings of parenthood. LeMasters (1974) argued that people have romantic beliefs about child rearing and thus suffer disenchantment after they become parents. Veevers (1973) referred to these beliefs as "cultural myths" surrounding parenthood, widely held but not supported by facts. LeMasters (1974) believes these myths developed around parenthood to ensure that the role was not avoided by most adults. Unfortunately, neither Veevers nor LeMasters obtained data on the general acceptance of these cultural myths. As well, these two articles predate many cultural changes such as the women's movement and family mobility: The former has challenged beliefs related to motherhood being instinctive and inherently fulfilling for women, while the latter would affect the cultural transmission of parenting and tend to contribute to generational differences in belief systems. Thus, the purposes of this study are to examine

adults' beliefs about parenthood in light of these cultural myths, and to account for their origins and importance.

Method

Measures

The Survey of Beliefs About Parenthood (SOBAP) consists of 54 Likert-type items (6-point scale) that were generated from the literature on the phenomenological experience of parenthood. Omitted were instrumental beliefs about child-rearing practices and descriptive beliefs about child behavior such as stages and gender differences (cf. Stolz, 1967). Additional items were derived from open-ended interviews with 46 parents concerning their experiences as parents. Specifically, each parent responded to the following questions:

> "Before you had children, what did you think it would be like to be a parent? What were your ideas and beliefs about parenthood, both positive and negative?"
>
> "Which of your ideas about parenthood changed after you had children?"
>
> "Which aspects of being a parent really surprised you? These might be positive or negative things you wished someone had told you before you had children."
>
> "Why is being a parent significant or meaningful to you?"

Themes identified through content analysis are available from the first author. All responses related to feelings of competence as a parent (i.e., self-concept) or to descriptive beliefs about children were omitted from the scale.

The Survey of Child-Care Experiences is an expanded version of the Catalog of Previous Experience with Infants (MacPhee,

1983). In addition to a number of items related to the amount of caregiving experience one has had, new items were included that asked about how much the subject enjoyed taking care of siblings and other children, and exposure to positive role models such as one's own parents and friends. It was thought that positive experiences with children and parents would predispose one to have more optimistic beliefs about parenthood.

Sample 1

The subjects were 98 undergraduates enrolled in a junior-level course on parenting. They completed the Survey of Beliefs About Parenthood on the first day of class and again during the last week, and the measure of child-care experience on the first day only. Five students failed to complete both assessment (n=93).

Sample 2

All students enrolled in the parenting course were required to complete a class project. Part of one project option included a comparison of the student's answers on the SOBAP with answers from six parents the student knew. As a result of this snowball sampling, data were collected from 204 parents whose ages ranged from 19 to 84 years (M=41.1, SD=11.6), and included 53 fathers. Education level ranged from 8 to 20 years (M=15, SD=2.7), 77% were married (10% divorced, 5.4% widowed), and they had an average of 2.36 children (range of 1-9, SD=1.19). Currently, a more rigorous random sampling procedure is being used to norm the SOBAP.

Results

Dimensions of Beliefs

Data from the sample of parents were subjected to principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. Four clear dimensions of beliefs emerged:

1. Generativity (alpha reliability = .90) consists of 27 items that relate to the meaning of the role as fulfilling, fostering maturity, fun, meaningful, instinctive, and rewarding.
2. Role Strain (alpha = .78) has 14 items on the tension between the parental role and other adult roles such as marriage, career, and leisure; as well as stresses related to time, money, and worrying about the child's welfare.
3. Parental Self-Restraint (alpha = .55) is a collection of items endorsing such beliefs as parents are emotionally stable, the role is less of a challenge, and parents are more other- than self-oriented.
4. Unidirectional Model (alpha = .44) consists of 4 items endorsing a parent-effects model as compared to a bidirectional model (e.g., parents are responsible for how their children turn out).

Correlations among the summated scores were low (rs < .13) and nonsignificant with the exception of a relation between Generativity and the endorsement of a Unidirectional Model (r=.40, p < .0001). Although the last two dimensions are based on interpretable factors, the low alphas warrant extreme caution

in treating these as coherent scales.

Endorsement of Cultural Myths

One purpose of this study is to see if in fact parents endorse the beliefs described by Veevers (1973) as cultural myths. Table 1 lists SOBAP items derived from LeMasters (1974) and Veevers (1973). On approximately half of these items, parents' experiences disagreed with expert opinion. For example, LeMasters (1974) said that few parents would apply the term "fun" to their role, although 92% did just that. The research literature suggests that children are gained at a cost to marital satisfaction (see Cowan & Cowan, 1989) yet two-thirds of these parents agreed that having children actually enhanced their marriages. It is important to note that culture does not operate in a monolithic fashion: On most of these items, all six response options were used, suggesting large individual differences in experiences as parents and in the acceptance of cultural messages about the role.

Sources of Variation in Beliefs

Parenthood & Instruction. Table 2 presents the means from the SOBAP for the sample of parents and the students, both pre- and posttest. First, the "naive" students and parents were fairly similar in their beliefs about parenthood with the exception that parents perceived significantly less role strain than did the students. Second, a number of changes in beliefs occurred as a result of taking a research-based course on parenting: Students were less likely to perceive parenthood as a

fun, fulfilling role, they perceived much more conflict between competing roles, and they were more likely to endorse a bidirectional model of child rearing. Their increased pessimism about parenthood can be attributed largely to the bias in the research literature toward the stresses of parenthood, in particular stresses related to the transition to parenthood and in dual-career families. Finally, due to gender differences in the amount of involvement in the parental role (Hochschild, 1989), we expected to find sex differences on the SOBAP for the parent sample but did not.

Exposure to Positive Role Models. In general, the college students had been exposed to positive role models which is not surprising given their interest in careers related to children and families. On the Survey of Child-Care Experiences, they rated their mothers and fathers as better than average (88% & 72%) and said that their parents had enjoyed parenthood (85% & 70%). Most (68%) also had parents who emphasized the importance of the parental role. Other parents they knew also were seen as competent (54%) and enjoying parenting (75%). Finally, most (91%-95%) enjoyed babysitting children (except siblings -- 39%) at various times in their lives.

The above items were highly intercorrelated and so were summed together into a single score related to positive role models. This score was correlated with Generativity (r=.21, p < .02) and with Role Strain (r= -.28, p < .005), although the restricted range probably attenuated the size of the

relationships.

Amount of Child-Care Experience. Students who had more exposure to children and information about them (8 items) had higher scores on Generativity (r=.25, $p < .01$) but not the other SOBAP dimensions. These students accumulate a wealth of experience with young children as part of their curricula, restricting the variability on the measure of experience and again attenuating correlations.

Cohort Effects. Assuming that culture's message about parenthood will change over generations, one would expect cohort differences in beliefs about parenthood. This assumption is strongly supported, as shown in Table 3 (multivariate $F(12,588) = 3.23$, $p < .0001$; univariate tests significant for Generativity (F=4.42, $p < .005$), Role Strain (F=2.67, $p < .05$), and Self-Restraint (F=3.70, $p < .01$). The sample of parents was subdivided by using widely recognized cohort markers such as the post-WWII Baby Boomers and those who were in their formative years during the Great Depression. Generations 1 (19-32 yr. olds) and 3 (47-59 yr. olds) were most similar on all four dimensions of the SOBAP. The "Traditionalists" of the oldest cohort endorsed the "Madonna image" of parenthood (Margolis, 1984): A person is not complete or happy without a child, parenting is instinctive, and it is the most important role for adults. They also perceived less role strain perhaps because there was more gender-typed division of labor that reduced friction between competing roles. The Baby Boomers (33-46 yrs.

old) questioned tradition and their own authority as parents. They disagreed with items related to having children because they perpetuate family traditions or because of the loyalty they show parents. They also disagreed that children force adults to become more mature, or that children give meaning to a marriage.

Conclusions

Are cultural myths so pronatalist that they coerce couples into becoming parents? If so, LeMasters (1974) argued, then when such beliefs clash with reality new parents will experience disenchantment and "crisis." However, these myths are not endorsed universally, especially by younger generations, and parents' beliefs did not reflect dysphoria with the role. This indicates less cultural coercion to become a parent than previously thought. What may matter more to couples who are contemplating becoming parents are individual experiences such as exposure to good role models and the enjoyment of children, although the select sample in this study makes such conclusions tenuous. A follow-up study is examining the relation between beliefs and experiences with children, on one hand, and fertility decision making on the other.

It <u>is</u> clear from the data that the culture to which one is exposed has some impact on one's beliefs about parenthood, although in our data cohort of the parent and age of the child are confounded. The generational differences in beliefs we found are consistent with other analyses of how the zeitgeist has changed (Hamner & Turner, 1985; Wolfenstein, 1953). More

importantly, such cohort differences in the "reality" of parenthood (see Frankel & Roer-Bornstein, 1982) may contribute to generational conflicts regarding child-rearing practices, an issue we are examining currently.

Pragmatically, the beliefs scale developed for this study may be an effective educational and evaluation tool. Exposure to the research literature on the phenomenology of parenthood led to significant changes in beliefs, although data from a control group will be needed to confirm a causal role for instruction. We are using the SOBAP in other studies as one measure of adjustment to parenthood, and envision it being used to help couples decide whether to become parents.

Philosophically, this study raises interesting questions about what constitutes realistic beliefs. For example, students who read research on the stresses of parenthood believed the role to be less fulfilling and more stressful than they had thought at the beginning of the term. Did the course make them more realistic, or pessimistic? Based on a comparison of the research literature with the zeitgeist's image of parenthood, LeMasters (1974) and Veevers (1973) argued that culture presents a romanticized view of the role. Yet the parents in this study endorsed many of these idealized beliefs. Were they being unrealistic? Given the empirical history of viewing parenthood as a time of crisis (see Cowan & Cowan, 1989), the dearth of

research on such rewarding aspects of parenthood as love,[1] and the reliance upon pathology based measures of depression and stress, perhaps the research findings present a more pessimistic view of the role than is warranted. If so, research strategies will need to be more holistic in their foci and efforts to educate prospective parents about the tasks confronting them will need to note the biases inherent in the literature.

[1]Schaffer notes that research on mothering "neglect[s] its more emotional aspects. We may pay lip service to the importance of love, but as yet we have not translated our respect into serious research" (p. 79).

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TABLE 1

ENDORSEMENT OF CULTURAL MYTHS ABOUT PARENTHOOD

	STUDENTS		PARENTS
REARING CHILDREN IS FUN[L]	98%		92%
CHILDREN ARE COOPERATIVE[L]	43%	<	56%
CHILDREN GIVE MEANING TO A MARRIAGE[LV]	50%	<	67%
CHILDREN MAKE COUPLES FEEL CLOSER	70%		70%
PARENTS HAVE LESS TIME FOR SPOUSE	50%		43%
SPOUSES GET LESS ATTENTION	58%		55%
PARENTING IS INSTINCTIVE[V]	34%	<	47%
LOVE IS ENOUGH TO BE A GOOD PARENT[L]	16%		20%
CHILDREN MAKE A PERSON COMPLETE[V]	50%	>	37%
CHILDREN ARE A MAJOR SOURCE OF FULFILLMENT FOR A WOMAN	85%		80%
NO BAD CHILDREN, ONLY BAD PARENTS[L]	7%	<	24%
GOOD PARENTS = GOOD CHILDREN[L]	53%		58%
PARENTS TREATED AS MATURE PEOPLE[LV]	82%	>	66%
PARENTS ARE EMOTIONALLY STABLE[V]	7%		12%
HAVING CHILDREN FORCES ADULTS TO BE MORE MATURE	63%	<	78%
HAVING CHILDREN IS A GOOD WAY TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE[L]	54%		43%

[L] FROM LEMASTERS (1974) [V] FROM VEEVERS (1973)

% = THOSE WHO MARKED SOMEWHAT TO STRONGLY AGREE

UNDERLINED ITEMS REPRESENT A DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN PARENTS' OWN EXPERIENCES AND EXPERT OPINION ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PARENTHOOD.

Table 2

Group Differences in Beliefs About Parenthood

			Students		
	Parents		Pretest		Posttest
Generativity	104.70		107.38	>	93.41
Role Strain	56.71	<	59.14	<	63.18
Self-Restraint	11.46		11.78		11.64
Unidir. Model	10.53		10.10	>	8.45

NOTE: Sig. differences indicated by arrows (MANOVAs).

Table 3

Generational Differences in Beliefs About Parenthood

	Generation*			
	1	2	3	4
Generativity	106.91_{b}	100.57_{a}	106.77_{b}	117.23_{c}
Role Strain	58.68_{a}	56.66_{a}	56.18_{a}	50.69_{b}
Self-Restraint	11.91_{b}	10.63_{a}	11.86_{b}	13.92_{c}
Unidir. Model	11.41	10.04	10.59	10.08

*1 = 19-32 years (N=54)
2 = 33-46 years (N=90)
3 = 47-59 years (N=44)
4 = 60-84 years (N=13)

Shared subscripts represent similar means [F(3,197)].